

Traveling Companion: Whirlwind thoughts from a Windy City

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Last week, I was invited to speak at a parish in the suburbs of Chicago about the impact of Hurricane Katrina on our parish.

One gray, drab, cold and windy morning, I decided to ride the train from the suburbs into Chicago. Bundled up in preparation for the chilling winds that whipped in from Lake Michigan, I began my walking journey around the streets of Chicago. I was there to sample the sights, sounds and smells of the city.

As I trudged through the streets of the city, I got a sampling of its bustling life. I heard the constant sounds of car horns and emergency vehicles as everyone hurried, with breakneck speed, to points of arrival or departure.

A heavy, misting rain covered the area in a fog of mystery as everyone scurried to some place else.

I noticed the fast-paced movement of people. Some talked on cell phones as they rushed by, others tugged at luggage carts, bringing their wares to some sales meetings. Most were bundled to ward off the inclement weather. Some, brave souls, with bare heads and short-sleeved shirts walked purposefully as if it were in the middle of the summer heat

I caught sight of a lone policeman, dressed in his long-sleeved black shirt and pants that supported the weapons of his trade. As I passed by, I caught snippets of his conversation on a cell phone. The decibels rose to a critical level and his language became more colorful and vulgar. I pitied the recipient of his phone call and hoped it might not be a spouse or a significant other.

During my five hour visit to the city, I spoke to no one except to order a sandwich at a fast food place. Just like everyone else in that mass of mobile humanity, I was in my own world, just like they were in their own world.

As I waited for the train to take me back to the suburbs and my friends again, I noticed the constant stream of people, descending the stairs and rushing to catch a waiting train that would take them home. They reminded me of a colony of ants, preoccupied with things, as they scurried in different directions.

On the train journey home, some read newspapers or a book as they tried to find some time to saturate their minds with more information. Some knitted. It was their form of therapy after a hard day at the office. Others computed the latest updates to a spreadsheet or unfinished business from their traveling office. Others just crashed and slept, only to be awoken by the gentle tap of the train's conductor looking for a ticket.

As the train rocked along, I reflected on my journey to the Windy City. I had a strange feeling that, even though I did not communicate with anyone and was a stranger to everyone; I, somehow, in some strange way, felt connected to this mass of humanity.

As I reflected on the experience, I remembered reading about a similar experience the monk and writer, Thomas Merton had. He had just been released from a hospital in Louisville. He stood on the corner of a street and looked out at the anonymous mass of humanity who passed in all directions. Even though he was a monk and cloistered from the world, he felt a oneness and affinity with the people.

I, too, realize that everyone has a story and a need to communicate it. I noticed that, even in a Windy City, the winds of connection rush through peoples lives even if they are anonymous. I realized that, even in the most chaotic times and situations, there are breakthroughs, even in windy cities.